

# Flann O'Brien and Modernism

Edited by  
Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald  
and Sascha Morrell

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## *An Béal Bocht*, Translation and the Proper Name

Maebh Long

*An Béal Bocht* tells the story, from birth to incarceration, of Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa, resident of Corca Dorcha in the Gaeltacht of the West of Ireland. There, in the unending rain, poverty and lust for potatoes he lives a harsh parody of the life described in Gaeltacht autobiographies and Revivalist writing. As Myles once wrote in the *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Synge, Gregory and Yeats 'persisted in the belief that poverty and savage existence on remote rocks was a most poetical way for people to be, provided they were other people,'<sup>1</sup> and so *An Béal Bocht* works to strongly critique the simultaneous idealization and abandonment of the native Irish speaker by pushing this 'poetic' way of life to a *reductio ad absurdum*, presenting a carnivalesque stretching of tendencies, difficulties and prejudices to histrionic, hyperbolic conclusions. It was, as O'Nolan described it,

an enormous jeer at the Gaelic morons here with their bicycle clips and handball medals but in language and style was an ironical copy of a really fine autobiographical book written by a man from the Great Blasket island of Kerry (long dead and now uninhabited) and translated into English under the title *The Islandman* by the late Robin Flower of the British Museum.<sup>2</sup>

*An Béal Bocht* depicts what might be called a tragi-farcical repetition of an anachronism: as Ireland attempted to create a sense of national identity, the Gaeltacht was understood through a form of ancestor worship, where living ancestors act in keeping with a past that the descendants create, and then

<sup>1</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (hereafter CL), 4 October 1954.

<sup>2</sup> Brian O'Nolan (hereafter BON) to Timothy O'Keeffe (hereafter TOK), of MacGibbon and Kee, 27 February, 1960. Brian O'Nolan Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Hereafter SIUC.

despise for being out of date. Thus, in *An Béal Bocht*, the inhabitants of Corca Dorchá are treated either as just Neanderthal miscreants, or as Neanderthal miscreants who hold some anthropological and linguistic interest. Irish is confused by a visiting linguist with the grunting of a drunken pig – a confusion which gets him a PhD – the poorest man in the village has his water bottle broken by a visitor from Dublin because it belies his charming Gaelic poverty, and visiting *Gaeligoirí* hold a *feis ceoil* in which the starving Irish speakers dance to their deaths. The inhabitants of the Gaeltacht are treated by the rest of Ireland as humanoid animals, or proto-humans, to the extent that Bónapárt asks his grandfather

*An bhfuilir cinnte . . . gur daoine na Gaeil?*

*Tá an t-ainm sin anuigh orthu, a uaislín . . . ach ní fritheadh deimhniú riamh air. Ní capaill ná cearca sinn, ní róna ná taibhsí, agus ar a shon sin is inchreidte gur daoine sinn.*<sup>3</sup>

Sean O'Casey described the novel as having 'the swish of Swift's scorn . . . bred well into the genial laughter of Mark Twain. It is well that we Gaels should come to learn that Gaels do not live by Gaelic alone, though, of course, no Gael can really live without it.'<sup>4</sup> It was, in short, 'a vicious bite at the hand that never fed it'.<sup>5</sup>

On the first, last and only day of Bónapárt's schooling, the vicious schoolmaster asks him his name: '*dhéirigh sé méar fhada bhuí orm, agus dúirt: "Phwat is yer nam?"*' (ABB, 25).<sup>6</sup> One of his classmates whispers that the English-speaking teacher wants Bónapárt's name, and so Bónapárt proudly recites his name and a list of predecessors. But in response the schoolteacher beats him on the head with an oar, screaming 'Yer nam . . . is Jams O'Donnell!' (ABB, 25). Leaving Bónapárt on the floor in a pool of blood, the teacher turns to each student in the class, giving each a violent beating and informing each

<sup>3</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht nó an Milleánach* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1999), 90. Hereafter cited in text as ABB. Translations given in footnotes, and taken from Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth* (London: Flamingo, 1993) unless otherwise stated. *The Poor Mouth* is referred to in citations as TPM.

'Are you certain that the Gaels are people?'

'They've that reputation anyway, little noble, . . . but no confirmation of it has ever been received. We're not horses nor hens; seals not ghosts; and in spite of all that, it's unbelievable that we're human' (TPM, 100). This is an example of problematic translation in Power. The final clause, a translation of *is inchreidte gur daoine sinn* should read 'it's plausible that we're human', as *inchreidte* does not mean 'unbelievable'.

<sup>4</sup> Sean O'Casey to BON, 2 April 1942, SIUC.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> 'he directed a long yellow finger at me and said "Phwat is yer nam?"' (TPM, 30).

that his name is Jams O'Donnell. Barely surviving the day, Bónapárt returns home, where he asks his mother what happened. She says:

*Bhí sé riamh ráite agus scríofa go mbuailtear gach tachrán Gaelach ar an gcéad lá scoile dó toisc na dtuigeann sé an Béarla and gall-leagan a ainm féinig, agus nach mbíonn aon mheas ag aoinne air toisc é a bheith Gaelach. Ní bhíonn aon ghnó eile ar scoil aon lá riamh ach an bualadh sin agus an tseafóid chéanna ar Jams O'Donnell. (ABB, 27)<sup>7</sup>*

The first day of schooling in Corca Dorchá is dedicated to teaching the boys the foreign form of their names. And regardless of what their names might be in Irish, in English they are all simply Jams O'Donnell. When Bónapárt is later accused of a murder he may or may not have committed – in O'Brien's texts there are never any wholly innocent victims – the policeman asks him for his name in English. And so Bónapárt gives it in English: Jams O'Donnell. He is then sent before a judge and tried. In English. As Jams O'Donnell. In *An Béal Bocht* Irish is other to the law, and its speakers must bow to the decrees of a legal system wholly beyond their understanding. Bónapárt can only speak Irish, a language unrecognized by the English-language judicial system, and he is, therefore, forced to act simply as a silent, partial presence, a body there to satisfy the writ of *habeas corpus* but not partake or defend himself. Justice, outside of language, wholly translatable and universal, is here absolutely anglophile and Anglophone, and, therefore, not justice at all. For the English speaker there is the law, but for the Irish speaker there is only prison, only the restriction of a language other to legality and right. The enactment of a trial is sufficient to ensure that justice is done, and thus the *process* of law is privileged.

If Irish is outside the law, Irish names are also outside it; in order for the law to prosecute this external other, he must be renamed, given a marker that enables animalistic life to be included within the law, as a legal entity if not an individual. 'Jams O'Donnell' is an institution under which a member of the excluded set of Irish speakers can be (partially) included within the law. Bónapárt is given an English name, a name naming the physical presence of a silent entity who can be tried as an adult, but entitling him to no more. He is, therefore, not subject but *object* located inside and outside the law; it functions around him, including and excluding him. The proper name 'Jams O'Donnell' is thus not given to mark identity or individuality.

<sup>7</sup> 'It was always said and written that every Gaelic youngster is hit on his first school day because he doesn't understand English and the foreign form of his name and that no one has any respect for him because he is Gaelic to the marrow. There's no other business going on in school that day but punishment and revenge and the same fooling about Jams O'Donnell' (TPM, 34).



'Jams O'Donnell' denotes simply the *category* or *genus* of 'male, Irish-speaking peasant'. In English the inhabitants of the Gaeltachts do not have individual proper names, but are designated simply by a generic term. If Kafka's man from the country cannot pass through the open gate to the Law, it is nonetheless his gate, his doorkeeper, all in his name. For Bónapárt there is merely a gate for Jams O'Donnell, as neither the doorkeeper nor the law itself deigns to speak his language. He is not before the law, he is *beneath* the law; beneath its notice as an individual but nonetheless under its control.<sup>8</sup>

If 'Jams O'Donnell' means every male, Irish-speaking peasant, then it may masquerade as a proper name, but it very clearly functions instead as a common noun. A proper name, as Derrida writes, has 'no meaning, no conceptualisable and common meaning', and when pronounced 'can designate [*viser*] only a single, singular individual, one unique thing'.<sup>9</sup> As proper names 'designate individuals who do not refer to any common concept', proper names do not mark a particular category.<sup>10</sup> In *An Béal Bocht* we witness the categorizing of a people through an improper proper name, that is, a common noun masquerading as proper name. Derrida, writing on the name of God, writes that there are doubts about the name when it 'risks to bind, to enslave or engage the other . . . to call him/her to respond even before any decision or deliberation, even before any freedom'.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere Derrida writes that 'Mastery begins . . . through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations'.<sup>12</sup> As Brian Friel's *Translations* demonstrates, the cultural transposition of the proper name is never a process free from ideology or the imposition of a hierarchy. When Owen, the schoolmaster's son, returns to Bailebeag, he is accompanied by two Englishmen there to create an English-language map of the region and thereby officially rename the country. Owen, who works as a translator for the men, has his own name translated? mispronounced? anglicized? into 'Roland' by them. When the villagers point out the Englishmen's mistake, Owen says, 'Owen – Roland – what the hell. It's only a name. It's the same me, isn't it? Well, isn't it?'<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>8</sup> An extended reading of Jams O'Donnell in relation to the law can be found in Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). The rest of this chapter adds to sections on translation and the proper name found in that text.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Who or What Is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation', trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Discourse* 30, 1–2 (2008): 36.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, 'Who or What', 36.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, 'Sauf le nom', in *On The Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 84.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 39.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations, Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 408.

answer is unambiguously 'no'. Owen and Roland are not the same person, and even if a proper name is changed into a proper name a violence is done. When a proper name is changed into a common noun, however, individuality and subjectivity are wholly denied. In *An Béal Bocht* we see a violent act of naming which works to bind and enslave, but does so by naming without giving a name worthy of the name.

When speculating on Jams O'Donnell Bónapárt says '*féach gur fónta an fear é O'Donnell and an líon sin clainne aige*' (ABB, 27).<sup>14</sup> To delimit and limit the speakers of the Gaelic mother tongue, they are given the improper name of a father who does not exist, and are forced to inherit his indigence and exclusion. The idea of inheriting nothingness is found in O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, in which the nameless narrator, having forgotten his name after death, reports the loss of a gold watch at the barracks. When confronted by a man personifying lack – he has no name and no bicycle – the policeman says: 'I was once acquainted with a tall man . . . that had no name either and you are certain to be his son and the heir to his nullity and all his nothings.'<sup>15</sup> Nameless, the inheritor of nothingness, the narrator is outside the law: 'If you have no name you possess nothing and you do not exist and even your trousers are not on you although they look as if they were from where I am sitting. On the other separate hand you can do what you like and the law cannot touch you' (TTP, 64). But when he is about to be hanged for a murder he did and did not commit, and he protests that he is outside the law, the sergeant responds:

"For that reason alone . . . we can take you and hang the life out of you and you are not hanged at all and there is no entry to be made in the death papers. The particular death you die is not even a death (which is an inferior phenomenon at the best) only an insanitary abstraction in the backyard, a piece of negative nullity neutralized and rendered void by asphyxiation and the fracture of the spinal string. If it is not a lie to say that you have been given the final hammer behind the barrack, equally it is true to say that nothing has happened to you."

"You mean because I have no name I cannot die and that you cannot be held answerable for death even if you kill me?"

"That is about the size of it," said the Sergeant. (TTP, 105)

Namelessness creates ontological aberrations and difficulties in proving the correct functioning of the law. And so when dealing with people who have been designated sub-human you bestow upon them not a proper name denoting singular subjects, but a common noun denoting a set. There is no

<sup>14</sup> 'isn't O'Donnell the wonderful man and the number of children he has?' (TPM, 31).

<sup>15</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 59. Hereafter cited in text as TTP.

Jams O'Donnell and yet everyone is Jams O'Donnell, named as the other for momentary and partial inclusion within the law. The name thus operates as a synonym for the Irish speaker, for Blasket-man, for islander, and thereby takes an indefinite article – I am *a* Jams O'Donnell. There is no grand, tragic defiance in the active embracing and declaration of the name – 'I am Jams O'Donnell' as 'I am Spartacus' – just a passive acceptance of the undesired and general designation of proper-name-as-common-noun – 'I am (a) Jams O'Donnell.' For the inhabitants of Corca Dorcha individual identity is irrelevant. They are not real people, nor even characters in a (realist) novel, but archetypes in a parodic farce lambasting the treatment of Irish speakers. In O'Brien's last completed novel, *The Dalkey Archive*, his protagonist is given the name often used as a slur against Irish Catholics – Mick – and women's decisions to retain maiden names is used to imply corruption and dissolution in *The Hard Life* and *Slattery's Sago Saga*. Naming is never an innocent act. While as Myles he may joke about it – 'people hostile to the historic language of this land always called it "Gaelic" not "Irish." I think that is a point that might be taken up with the Gaelic League'<sup>16</sup> – O'Nolan was aware of the power of the name.

In *An Béal Bocht*'s chapter on the *Gaeligoirí Bónapárt* writes that the visiting 'Gaelic Morons' were more Gaelic than the Gaels, as they were nameless. Lacking names and surnames they are free to give themselves titles that arise from nature:

*Bhí bua eile acu nach raibh againne riamh anall ó chailleamar an fíor-Ghaelachas – bhíodar go léir gan ainmneacha gan sloinnte, ach teidil bhreátha glactha acu agus féin-bhaistithe orthu ón spéir agus ón aer, ón bhfeirm agus ón stoirm, ón bpáirc agus ón gcearc. Bhí fear ramhar toirtiúil mallbhogtha ann le haghaidh liath lodartha, a chuma air go raibh sé idir bhásanna ag dhá ghalar mharfacha, agus is é teideal a thug sé air féin ná 'An Nóinín Gaelach'; duine bocht eile a raibh toirt agus fuinneamh luchóige ann, thug sé air féin 'An Tarbh Teann'; an tríú duine a bhí ciúin ceansa neamhurchóideach, thug sé air féin 'An Pocán Meidhreach', d'ainneoin nár phoc sé aoinne riamh agus nach raibh sé meidhreach. (ABB, 44)<sup>17</sup>*

<sup>16</sup> CL 3 November 1944.

<sup>17</sup> 'They had yet another distinction which we did not since we lost true Gaelicism – they all lacked names and surnames but received honorary titles, self-granted, which took their style from the sky and the air, the farm and the storm, field and fowl. There was a bulky, fat, slow-moving man whose face was grey and flabby and appeared suspended between deaths from two mortal diseases; he took unto himself the title of *The Gaelic Daisy*. Another poor fellow whose size and energy were that of a mouse, called himself *The Sturdy Bull*' (*TPM*, 52). The third man is not included in the translated version, but, using my own translation, it reads: 'the third person was quiet, meek, harmless, and he called himself "The Frisky Blow" but he'd never hit anyone and wasn't frisky'.

The 'natural' namelessness of the Irish is supplemented by a prosthetic title, self-chosen and self-appointed, which reflects not the attributes of the individual, but the traits he wished he had. Thus a grey, deathly man can be a lively daisy, a weak wretch can be a bull, and a shy, inoffensive soul can be a lover and a fighter. The absence of a name enables wish-fulfilling, contradictory titles whose inappropriateness is funny – there is a *Fód Móna* (Sod of Turf), *Popshúil Mairnéalach* (Popeye the Sailor), *Chiaróg Eile* (Other Beetle) – and also serves to mock *An Craoibhín Aoibhinn* (the Pleasant Little Branch), the name taken by Douglas Hyde.<sup>18</sup> More fundamentally than this, however, it reinforces the non-native speakers' treatment of the Gaels as antiquated, anachronistic and improper. Names in Irish, they suppose, are not proper names but always titles or sobriquets that relate to a characteristic – real or imagined – of an individual. In other words, the Irish are always already nameless, and requiring the addition or imposition of a name-as-category-type. There is never an attempt to give the Irish speakers a proper name – they are associated always with superficial descriptors and categories.

### Translation and the name

The difficulty of naming in O'Brien's works is compounded by the difficulty in naming him. Is he Brian O'Nolan, Brian Ó Nualláin, Myles na gCopaleen, Myles na Gopaleen, Lord Nolan of Santry, Flann O'Brien, George Knowall, John James Doe, An Broc, Brother Barnabas, Count O'Blather, or any of the other names he harassed his own alter egos under in *The Irish Times*? If, as he wrote regarding *An Béal Bocht*, 'Every genuine copy bears the name, "Myles na gCopaleen,"'<sup>19</sup> then how do we read the translation – *The Poor Mouth* – given that the cover proudly displays the name of Flann O'Brien? Further complicating the movement between the Irish proper name and the English common noun is Power's translation of *An Béal Bocht*, in which the names of places and people are altered. While the anglicization of Irish proper names has a long history, the decision to alter names within a literary text is, while not without precedent, extremely problematic. Why, in a text so engaged – parodically and earnestly – with the treatment of the Irish language, would the translation present proper names according to English spellings and English equivalences?

<sup>18</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 501–2.

<sup>19</sup> CL 12 December 1941.

The most sympathetic answer is that Power merely continued O'Brien's mode of naturalizing foreign names. The majority of first names in *An Béal Bocht* are not Irish names – Sitric is a Norse name, Micheálangaló and Lánardó are both Italian, Feardanand is originally Germanic and Bónapárt is a French surname – but O'Brien transcribes them according to Irish phonetic rules, and thereby assimilates the ignored and destitute in Corca Dorcha into a wider history of empires and aristocratic culture. In sharp contrast to their poverty and plebeian vulgarity are their names, appellations that universalize their plight, invert histories of imperial oppression and mock the concept of a stable, isolated Irish identity. Arguably, when Power translates the text, he continues this trait of transcribing names, and spells them according to the rules of the language of the text, in this case English. When O'Nolan translated Brinsley MacNamara's play *Margaret Gillan*, one of the major issues was the proper name/title. In letters between the publishers and O'Nolan different names were suggested; Maighréad Gilion, Maighréad Gillan, Máiréad Gilion were proposed, while O'Nolan became quite heated in making the distinction between Maighréad Ní Ghilleáin (this would imply that she was unmarried) and Maighread Bean Uí Ghilleáin (this implies that she was married).<sup>20</sup> When discussing the translation of *An Béal Bocht* Evelyn O'Nolan showed concern regarding the transition of names between languages, writing to O'Keeffe that 'Power translates "Corca Dorcha" as "Corkadoragha." Somewhere Brian himself referred to the same place as "Corkey Dorkey" which is much better.'<sup>21</sup> Similarly, when Kevin O'Nolan wrote to Evelyn to comment on possible translators for the text he criticized the early attempt made by Maurice Kennedy, focusing in particular on Kennedy's odd translation of the name of Bónapárt's townland – *Lios na bPráiscín* (the fort of the apron) – as 'The Mound of Mashed Potatoes'.<sup>22</sup> Much work was done on finding a translator that could capture the 'verve and "go" of Brian's Irish',<sup>23</sup> but even Power's was not deemed perfect, Kevin O'Nolan writing that 'the translation [Power's] is a little too easy going. It is not always faithful in detail and though this may not always matter there is danger of overlooking small points.'<sup>24</sup> This is particularly clear in the list of the titles taken by the *Gaeligoirí*. Power mistranslates some, excludes others and adds ones that O'Brien never

<sup>20</sup> Letters May 1943 between O'Nolan and Sean McLellan. O'Nolan publically comments on his irritation on this point in a *Cruiskeen Lawn* article on 31 October 1953.

<sup>21</sup> Evelyn O'Nolan (hereafter EON) to TOK 28 November 1969. Flann O'Brien Papers, MS.1997.027, John J. Burns Library, Boston College. Hereafter BC.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin O'Nolan to EON 29 November 1969, BC.

<sup>23</sup> EON to TOK 22 October 1969, BC.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin O'Nolan to EON 29 November 1969, BC.

included in either the MS or published versions of *An Béal Bocht* – ‘The Gluttonous Rabbit’, and ‘The Headache’, for example (see appendix for a full list). Interestingly, in the MS version of *An Béal Bocht* Jams O’Donnell does not exist, as the common noun all male children are re-named with is *Jams Gallagher*. Jams Gallagher is a play on James Gallagher from Máire’s (Séamus Ó Grianna) novel *Mo Dhá Róisín*, in which a pupil learns of his official name – James Gallagher – for the first time when he went to school.

The difficulty of translating *An Béal Bocht* is not restricted to decisions on names. As the text contains English, Irish and phonetically mixed transliterations of the two, the movement between languages is complicated. For example, the shock of the phonetically transcribed ‘Phwat is yer nam?’ in the Irish text is lost in English. In the Irish text the *Gaeligoir* with whom the Seanduine speaks regarding the loss of the students in Corca Dorcha speaks in Irish, but in Irish spelt according to English phonetic rules: ‘*Nee doy lom goh vwill un fukal sin* “meath” *eg un Ahur Padur*’ (AB, 42) [Lit: ‘I don’t think that Father Peter has the word “decline”’]. And when the Seanduine dismisses him in frustration, his Irish is suddenly transcribed through English too, presumably in mockery of the man’s accent: ‘*Nawbocklesh, avic*’ (AB, 42) [‘Don’t worry about it, son’]. Not only is O’Brien’s use of transliteration and phonetics multifaceted – this is found too in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* articles on what he called Corkadorky – a certain complexity lies in his idiosyncratic use of Irish. Thus an anonymous reader’s report for *An Béal Bocht* states:

I can quite safely assert that in an experience of sixty years this is quite the craziest piece of Irish I have ever seen. What most surprises me is the self-assurance of its author – a man who demonstrates twenty times on every page that he is the veriest tyro in the Irish language. For want of knowledge he cannot begin, or continue or finish a sentence properly. Constructions such as he writes have never before been seen in Irish, and one earnestly hopes that nothing of the kind will ever be repeated.<sup>25</sup>

While not everyone agreed with such a harsh assessment, O’Brien himself was very resistant to translations of his Irish texts, writing ‘I don’t think there is any point about translating stuff I have written in Irish into English. The significance of most of it is verbal or linguistic or tied up with a pseudo

<sup>25</sup> Reader Report, unnamed and undated (presumably 1941) for *An Béal Bocht*, BC.

Gaelic mystique and this would be quite lost in translation.<sup>26</sup> Translation did, however, fascinate him, and he spoke of the possibility of translating the translations of some of his later texts. Timothy O'Keeffe joined in the idea of linguistic play, speculating in a letter to O'Brien on Gregory's mode of writing: "Lady Gregory would translate the French text into English, and after the English had been put into Irish by a native writer, the Irish text would be translated back into English by Lady Gregory." Doesn't that ring a bell?<sup>27</sup>

The mixture of names within *An Béal Bocht*, the presence of two languages within the novel(s), the innovative structures and the problems of translation create a polylingual and multicultural cacophony, a post-Babelian complexity. As Derrida writes in 'Des 'Tours de Babel', the tower of Babel falls and the single, universal tongue or idiom is made multiple when God, in his jealousy of the power of the tribe of Shem, creates linguistic confusion by speaking his name. The tribe of Shem wished to make a name for themselves, to be positioned and protected by a common name and a tower; a linguistic and non-linguistic signifier. Against this single tongue, single tower and single name – the name 'Shem' means 'name', and names the desire or aspiration for a universal language – God speaks his name, 'Babel' which comes from the Hebrew 'Bavel' meaning 'confusion'. Shem and God, name and confusion; both are proper name and common noun, and both name a certain linguistic undecidability and doubling. A common noun can be translated as it refers to a general concept, but a proper name exists outside translation, as it does not refer to a conceptual generality, and does not, therefore, strictly belong to the language in which it operates: 'personal proper names cannot be translated. They are sometimes adapted, in pronunciation or transcription . . . but they cannot be translated.'<sup>28</sup> Proper names do not mean, proper names do not describe or signify attributes, proper names cannot, therefore, be translated. A proper name is not a proper part of language. It can be spelt in different ways, and pronounced in different ways, but not translated. And yet it is precisely around proper names and that propriety/impropriety that *An Béal Bocht* investigates different modes of translation and control.

The story of Babel, the tale of the origin of linguistic diversity, of the confusion of tongues, stems from a speech act itself confused between names and nouns, the proper and the common. This complicated locutionary act brings about the possibility of translation – to enable interlingual

<sup>26</sup> BON to TOK 27 February 1960, SIUC.

<sup>27</sup> TOK to BON 26 May 1965, SIUC.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Who or What', 36.

communication – and its impossibility – idioms will never exactly correspond. The impossible necessity of translation is played out in every version of the story: how does one convey the double meaning of Babel, the intralinguistic translation between proper name and common noun already at play within the name itself? To translate it, as Derrida explains in *The Ear of the Other*, by ‘confusion’ is to translate a proper name into a common noun. Thus, he argues, the story of Babel is the story of an imperative: people are condemned to translate, and to begin with an act of impossible translation, that of a proper name. The tower is brought down by a speech act that is a double act of naming: a naming of God, and a naming of the act, that of confusion itself. The locutionary act self-refers as name (a proper name exhausts itself in referring to a singular individual) and yet that self-referential naming operates within the realm of the common noun to instigate a performative act: in uttering the name (of confusion) confusion reigns. The proper moves towards the common and the double speech act becomes a double bind as God instigates the necessity of translation by uttering his proper and untranslatable name, whose power of confusion lies in its (intralingual) translatability as a common noun. As Derrida says, ‘this desire is at work in every proper name: translate me, don’t translate me’.<sup>29</sup> The name becomes a mark of non-belonging, an absence within a language. Even though language is not possible without the name – ‘what would a language be without the possibility of calling by a proper name?’<sup>30</sup> – it does not belong to the language, and ‘consequently it can properly inscribe itself in a language only by allowing itself to be translated therein, in other words, *interpreted* by its semantic equivalent’.<sup>31</sup>

What then, occurs in the alternations between names within *An Béal Bocht*, and between *An Béal Bocht* and *The Poor Mouth*? What is the relation between Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa and Jams O'Donnell? What is the relation between Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa and Bonaparte O'Coonassa? Do we see impossible translations, problematic alterations or legitimate equivalences? Remaining first of all within the Irish text, *An Béal Bocht* is about impossible, reductive and controlling instances of translation: the movement from Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa to Jams O'Donnell is an act of inexecutable and violent translation, one in which the alteration of the signifier instigates a radical shift in the signified. Bónapárt is a singular subject in possession of an untranslatable proper name, but Jams O'Donnell is a homogeneous object within the law labelled by a translatable common noun. The ‘translation’ from

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 102.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, trans. Joseph F. Graham (Routledge: New York, 2002), 109.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, ‘Babel’, 109–10.



Irish to English creates a wholly different signified. English cannot recognize the untranslatable individual and proper name that is Bónapárt, all it can see is the translatable common noun that is Jams O'Donnell. That is, in English there is no Bónapárt; he does not exist and cannot be seen.

This movement is complicated when *An Béal Bocht* is translated into English, and everything, even untranslatable proper names, become altered. Within *The Poor Mouth*, the movement from Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa to Bonaparte O'Coonassa may simply have been intended to be an uncomplicated transcription that enables non-Irish speakers to pronounce Irish names, but its operation as translation is impossible to ignore. If a text that establishes that a subject in Irish becomes no more than object in English is translated into English, and the very site of the point of opposition – the proper name/common noun – becomes a site of translation/transcription, then an undeniable performative contradiction is created. The tension between the language in which the text is written – Irish – and the language of education, biopolitical control and the law – English – is lost when the entire text is written in English, and particularly if the names are altered. The name which marks a locus of singularity – albeit a name not 'originally' Irish – cannot mark the same degree of difference from Jams O'Donnell when it is already in the same language/phonetics as Jams O'Donnell. The vital linguistic distinction and shock of the eradication of the name in the native tongue is lost.

Bónapárt – in Irish – is a playful parody of the Irish-language characters of the West of Ireland autobiographies, and a harsh satire of the representations of Irish speakers in (predominantly) English texts. Bonaparte – in English – is still a parody and a satire, but a parody of the translated autobiographies, and a satire whose proximity to that harshly mocked is radically increased. In other words, the distance between satirically representing an Irish stereotype, and being a stereotype, is drastically reduced when read in English. Within the context of English, Bónapárt/Bonaparte is, even prior and separate to being named 'Jams O'Donnell', too much a stereotype, too much a stage character, too much a farcical repetition to be anything but a common noun designating a concept. In English, the language through which Irish-speakers are understood as anachronistic and inferior, Bónapárt/Bonaparte is always already Jams O'Donnell. Bonaparte is not the direct and simple equivalent of Bónapárt, the same signified in a different language, but a wholly different mode of stereotype. While Bónapárt cannot be translated, Bonaparte can, as despite its connotations of grand conquest and ambition, within *The Poor Mouth* it operates as Jams O'Donnell, or Paddy, or 'Mick', and means Irish stereotype. While names are of untranslatable individuals in Irish, in English they are markers of translatable category types.

**Appendix:** Alterations to titles between *An Béal Bocht* (MS and published versions) and *The Poor Mouth*. (Note: The list in the MS of *The Poor Mouth* is the same)

Original MS	Published Text (ABB)	Published Translation (TPM)
<i>Cat Chonnacht</i> (Connacht Cat)	<i>Cat Chonnacht</i>	Connacht Cat
<i>Uan Orighialla</i> (16 clock a meadhchai) (Lamb of Oriel (16 stone Mikey))	<i>An Circín Donn</i>	The Little Brown Hen
<i>An Préachán Péacach</i> (The Gaudy Crow)	<i>An Capall Dána</i>	The Bold Horse
<i>An Géigin Bréige</i> (The Imitation little Branch/Goose)	<i>An Préachán Péacach</i>	The Gaudy Crow
<i>Roisín an tSléibhe</i> (Roseen of the Hill)	<i>An Ridire Reatha</i>	The Running Knight
<i>Goll Mac Mórna</i> (Goll Mac Morna)	<i>Roisín an tSléibhe</i>	Roseen of the Hill
<i>An Fhuiseog Spéire</i> (The Skylark)	<i>Goll Mac Mórna</i>	Goll Mac Morna
<i>An Spideog</i> (The Robin)	<i>Popshúil Mairnéalach</i>	Popeye the Sailor
<i>An Babhta Damhsa</i> (The Bout of Dancing)	<i>An tEaspag Íseal</i>	The Humble Bishop
<i>An tUltach Beadaigh</i> (The Bandy Ulsterman)	<i>An Lonn Dubh Binn</i>	The Sweet Blackbird
<i>An Sionnach Seang</i> (The Slim Fox)	<i>Tuirne Mháire</i>	Mary's Spinning-wheel
<i>An Cat Mara</i> (The Sea Cat)	<i>An Fód Móna</i>	The Sod of Turf
<i>An Crann Géagach</i> (The Branchy Tree)	<i>Babaró</i>	Baboro

(Continued)

## Appendix (Continued)

Original MS	Published Text (ABB)	Published Translation (TPM)
<i>An Ghaoith Anair</i> (The West Wind)	<i>Mo Chara Droma Rúisc</i>	My Friend Drumroosk
<i>An Muinhneach Measardha</i> (The Temperate Munsterman)	<i>An Maide Rámha</i>	The Oar
<i>An Buidéal Buidhe</i> (The Yellow Bottle)	<i>An Chiaróg Eile</i>	The Other Beetle
<i>Liam Mairnéalach</i> (William the Sailor)	<i>An Fhuiseog Spéire</i>	The Skylark
<i>An tUbh Donn</i> (The Brown Egg)	<i>An Spideog</i>	The Robin Redbreast
<i>Ochtar Fear</i> (Eight Men)	<i>An Bata Damhsa</i>	The Bout of Dancing
<i>Tadhg Gabha</i> (Tim the Blacksmith)	<i>An tUltach Beadaí</i>	The Bandy Ulsterman
<i>An Coileach Corcordha</i> (The Purple Rooster)	<i>An Sionnach Seang</i>	The Slim Fox
<i>An Stuicín Eorna</i> (The Little Stack of Barley)	<i>An Cat Mara</i>	The Sea-cat
<i>An Tuiseal Tabharthach</i> (The Dative Case)	<i>An Crann Géagach</i>	The Branchy Tree
<i>Airgead Geal</i> (Bright Silver)	<i>An Ghaoith Anair</i>	The West Wind
<i>An Mac Breac</i> (The Speckled Fellow)	<i>An Muinhneach Measardha</i>	The Temperate Munsterman
<i>An-Fear-Is-Fearr-in-Éirinn</i> (The Best Man in Ireland)	<i>An Buidéal Bui</i> (The Yellow Bottle)	[missing]
	<i>Liam Mairnéalach</i>	William the Sailor

## Appendix (Continued)

Original MS	Published Text (ABB)	Published Translation (TPM)
	<i>An tUbh Donn</i> [The Brown Egg]	The White Egg
	<i>Ochtar Fear</i>	Eight Men
	<i>Tadhg Gabha</i>	Tim the Blacksmith
	<i>An Coileach Corcra</i>	The Purple Cock
	<i>An Staicín Eorna</i>	The Little Stack of Barley
	<i>An Tuiseal Tabharthach</i>	The Dative Case
	<i>Airgead Geal</i>	Silver
	<i>An Mac Breac</i>	The Speckled Fellow
	<i>An-Fear-Is-Fearr-i-nÉirinn</i>	[missing]
		The Headache
		The Lively Boy
		The Gluttonous Rabbit
		The High Hat
		John of the Glen
		Yours Respectfully
		The Little Sweet Kiss